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Leopoldville Coup

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GENERAL Mobutu chose a rather unusual venue for his November 25 press conference; the paratroop camp at Binza, a suburb of Leopoldville. And the press conference itself was unusual. Mobutu told the assembled pressmen that he had deposed President Kasavubu and Prime Minister Kimba and proclaimed himself President of the Congo for the next five years. In that capacity he had appointed his close friend, Colonel Mulamba, Prime Minister and instructed him to form a "government of national union." A government, he added, that "will pass by acclamation through parliament." Nor was that all. The Congolese Constitution would be changed and the presidential elections appointed for next February postponed indefinitely.

A one-time minor army clerk and minor newspaper reporter, Joseph Mobutu appeared on the political scene in the late fifties. He was a supporter of Lumumba's Congolese National Movement. In June 1960 Lumumba appointed him State Secretary at the President's office and somewhat later chief of staff with the rank of colonel. In September 1960 Mobutu staged a military coup, deposed Lumumba and established a regime of "commissioners-general." In 1961 President Kasavubu made him commander-in-chief of the Congolese army with the rank of general. In giving these details of the Mobutu biography, Reuter's considered it necessary to point out that "General Mobutu has made frequent trips to Europe and the United States."

President Kasavubu's decision to dismiss Prime Minister Tshombe caused a good deal of irritation in the West. And so did some of the statements and actions of the new Premier, Evariste Kimba, and Kasavubu. They suggested that the

government intended to follow a more realistic policy on some controversial issues.

Premier Kimba took steps to normalize relations with the other Congo (Brazzaville). It was suggested that the Congolese crisis could not be resolved by armed force and that a political solution had to be sought together with the patriotic forces. Lastly, it was officially announced that the white mercenaries would be asked to leave the Congo. And though nothing was done in that direction, this caused little short of panic in some Western capitals. For the white mercenaries were being used not only against the insurgents, but also to enforce pro-Western policies and safeguard Western interests.

Premier Kimba presented his cabinet to parliament on November 14. He failed to obtain a vote of confidence, because, as *Le Courier*

d'Afrique suggests, "everything had been arranged beforehand, largely by the dispensation of banknotes." Kasavubu, however, instructed Kimba to try again.

At this point a plot was discovered, engineered by the Belgian military mission. Belgian "advisers" tried to provoke rioting in Leopoldville as a pretext for arresting undesirable leaders and bringing Tshombe back to power. The plot was scotched. Four of its chief organizers, Colonel Lamouline, Major Portain, and airmen Braco and Libert, were expelled from the country.

That was on November 16. At 4 a.m. on the 25th, Leopoldville radio announced that after a long conference the military had decided to "take over power" to protect Congo's national interests. There is credible evidence that this was done not without outside help. At any rate, reports of the pending coup circulated long before Mobutu held his Binza press conference. Two weeks before that, the *Libre Belgique* said "a coup is in the air" and "General Mobutu is likely to duplicate the September 1960 operation." The

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